



# Getting “it” in prison

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The Federal Correctional Institution at Lompoc, California looks exactly like what it is — a prison. The huge grey concrete structure stands like a square mountain in the middle of the flat and windy lowlands north of Santa Barbara. Just outside the 12-foot, double barbed wire topped electric fences which surround the building looms a 200-foot tower which guards the main entrance.

I drove up to the loud speaker at the base of the tower.

Click. "May I help you?"

"My name is Neal Rogin, and I am here for the est training."

A pause.

Click. "Do you have any alcoholic beverages, narcotics or firearms in your possession?"

"No, I do not."

"Very well. Park your car and proceed to the main gate."

I was soon standing in front of a heavy glass door. The electronic lock clanked open with the sound of a rifle bolt. I walked in and was greeted by Burt Kerish, Clinical Psychologist at Lompoc for the past fifteen years.

"Is this the first time you've been to a prison?" he asked as we walked across the yard and up the steps to the main building. I told him that when I was fourteen years old, I went along with my Pony League baseball team on a tour of the Cook County Jail in Chicago.

We were allowed through some more heavily guarded doors and into the main corridor of the prison. "This is a Federal Prison," Burt continued, "men are put here for things like bank robbery, murder, kidnapping, unlawful flight to avoid prosecution. . ."

Small groups of inmates were leaning against the white tile walls, sizing me up, looking me over, checking me out, nudging each other as we walked past. My camera bag, briefcase and groovy Indian bracelet felt very conspicuous.

Burt was one of four members of the prison staff who, along with 54 inmates, participated in the first Lompoc training which Werner conducted in July of last year. "Most of the inmates who took that first training have been released, and I don't mean

to say it was because of the training," he told me, "I don't really know. Some of them got out because their sentences were up; others were able to tell the parole board clearly that they were ready to be responsible."

"I've been around this place for a long time," he continued, "and I was frankly skeptical that an outside group would be able to have any real effect on the inmates. I was amazed at the trainer's ability to call these people on their acts so accurately, and to do it in a way that allowed the guys to cop to it, rather than dramatize it, which is what they usually do."

We arrived at the training area and went in. It was a brightly lit and carpeted multi-purpose room that could just as well have been in a student union as in a prison. The trainees were seated in colored plastic chairs, most of them wearing some variation of the prison uniform of khaki shirts and pants, green t-shirts and blue jackets. I was surprised to see several women among the trainees.

"They're part of the prison staff and their wives," whispered Training Supervisor Joe Roza as I sat down at the back table. Joe's responsibility as Training Supervisor is to see to it that the physical space of the training is totally secure, so that the trainer is able to devote his full attention to the people in the training and to deliver the material. Not only big physically, Joe is also big in intention. It was clear that the room was well set up. Trainer Ted Long had the maximum opportunity in which to deliver the training and didn't have to have his attention on anything other than being with the trainees — which he was doing brilliantly.

"I know that the agreement around here is that you have to be tough and resistant, and bitch about how bad things are, and I want you to get that that doesn't work. It doesn't work to wave the traffic on the freeway in the direction opposite to the way it is going. The traffic on the freeway doesn't give a damn about you. And I don't mean you have to give in to the system. I mean to be responsible for it the way it is. You set it up this way. Now dig it."

A hand went up.

"Ron," said Ted.

"This dude that guards my unit hassles me all the time, man, and it's a drag. Last week I started growing a beard, you know, and he stops me in the hall and says, 'Hey boy, you need a shave.'"

"And what did you tell him?" asked Ted.

"I told him to shove it, man," Ron said with a triumphant smile.

"Good, did it work?"

"It sure felt good."

"I know, Ron, but did it work?"

"Well, no."

"See, the way you set it up," Ted continued, "is that you are the prisoner and he's the guard. That's the way it is. And no amount of resisting it will change that. Now you have a choice. You can keep resisting, or you can choose it. You can bitch about it, or you can take responsibility for it. If you come from the notion that you caused it, that the rules around here are your rules, you can run it instead of having it run you."

"But that dude is wrong," protested Ron.

"So what," said Ted, "I mean really, so what? The trouble is, you are more interested in being right about how bad a guy he is than you are in making your life in here really work. And the only one you are cheating, the only one you are putting things over on, is yourself."

"You could have said," Ted continued, "Gee, thank you very much for reminding me. I was actually thinking about that very thing. You know it really slipped my mind, and I appreciate your pointing it out to me. You are really a very considerate person." And that doesn't mean be a boot-licker."

"It means taking responsibility for the way things are. You created him out here, Ron, and the only way to make your life work is to support the things you already created. Don't take my word for it. See for yourself if supporting people works better than making them wrong."

Because of the time schedule at the prison, the training is conducted in three weekends instead of the usual two. It begins at 9:00 AM; the first



break is taken at about 1:00 PM; the dinner break is from 4:00 to 6:00 PM, and the training ends each evening at 9:30 PM. So it isn't exactly what you'd call grueling. And it isn't easy. What comes up for the trainees to experience is often more than uncomfortable.

Take the case of Bobby. Bobby was in Lompoc for homicide. Throughout the training he wore very dark glasses and sat in the back row. The only time he took them off was when Ted confronted him in the Danger Process, and even then he did everything to avoid looking at anyone. "The Danger Process was really a high point in this training," Ted later told me. "It was the time when they got in touch with their tough guy acts and became a group."

It was after the Danger Process that things really began to come up for Bobby. Sometime during the afternoon of the third Saturday, I looked up and saw an empty chair in the back row. Turning toward the door, I saw Bobby moving unsteadily towards it. Joe walked over to him. They stood there for a long time. A very long time. I wondered what was going on. Joe later explained, "What Bobby was looking at, what had come up for him was whatever it was that made him kill people. He said he couldn't stand being in the room any more and that he not only wanted to get out of the training, he wanted to get out of the prison. He was literally ready to go over the wall, rather than experience what was coming up."

"I didn't press him on it. That doesn't work. I just gave him the space to look, and to communicate. He knew that this was his number, and he was able to see that he was standing at a crossroad. I pointed out to him that he was totally free to leave the training without being hassled. . . that it was perfectly OK with Ted for him to be there or not be there. . . and that this was an opportunity for him to do something he never did before. . . to move through the barrier he was up against and to be done with it. After four hours, he chose to stay."

After the dinner break, Ron, who was in the front row, stood up to share. "I was coming back from my

unit after dinner, and the dude I told you about started hassling me again. He said, 'Hey, boy, where's your pass?'"

"And what did you say," asked Ted.

"Well," answered Ron, "I started to say something smart, and I stopped myself. Instead I said, 'Why thank you sir, that's very nice of you to be concerned about me and my friends here. Would you mind escorting us safely back to the est training?' He didn't know what to do. I got to tell you, man, it worked!" and he slapped Ted's hand.

Later on that day when everybody "got it," Ron *really* got it. He burst out laughing, and laughed on and off for the rest of the day. After the training, Ron was able to contain himself long enough to apologize to Ted for being a distraction. "I couldn't help myself. It's the first time I've laughed since I been in this joint!"

Being in prison doesn't seem to be such a terrible punishment for people after they have taken responsibility for their lives. Being responsible may be the key to making prisons work. As Ted pointed out in the training, "If you guys find out that you dig it here, they might have to close this place."

I talked to Tim, one of the six graduates who were assisting with the microphones and handling the logistics for the training. Five of the six, including Tim, took the first Lompoc training and are inmates themselves. Tim looks like a typical college football halfback. He's bright, cheerful, alive. I asked him what he was in jail for. "Robbing banks," he said as if it were parking tickets. "I knocked over six before they caught up with me."

"What did you get out of the training?" I asked, swallowing my surprise. He leaned over and whispered so no one else could hear, "I'm having a ball in prison."

On Sunday morning, I had the privilege of doing the Personality Profile demonstration. The trainees thought I was some kind of wizard, until later that night when they did it themselves. I have been to many graduations in est, and this one had to be one of the most inspiring experiences I have ever had. At about 6:30

PM the trainees were joined by more than 50 graduates from the Santa Maria and Lompoc area, who were specially cleared by the prison authorities to be there when no other visitors are allowed.

After Ted talked about where it all began, he closed the training by sharing his experience of his relationship with Werner and reading from Werner's Aphorism Book: "If God told you exactly what it was you were to do, you would be happy doing it no matter what it was. What you're doing is what God wants you to do. Be happy."

After all the trainees had become graduates, people refused to go away; the feeling of love and communication in the room was so intense that I have rarely experienced anything like it. The graduates walked around getting to know one another, laughing, sharing, swapping stories, hugging. All differences disappeared. There was no outside or inside. . . no prisoners or visitors. . . there was just the commonly shared experience of knowing who's responsible for it all.

I overheard one new graduate say, "I am now the guru of my whole unit. I got sixty guys following me around asking me questions about the way things is. They say to me, 'Hey, September, say it again what you said before,' and I say it again, and they say 'Yeah, right on!'"

We were about to leave when Bobby came over to Ted and stood there, without his glasses for the first time. He moved close to Ted, took his hand, muttered and stammered something under his breath and hurried shyly away. "What did he say?" I asked. Without taking his eyes off Bobby as the inmate walked away, Ted said, "He told me he loved me."

*Neal Rogin, freelance writer and former est staff member, covered the first est training at the Federal Correctional Institution at Lompoc, California in 1974. This is his experience of that training.*